



Plymouth's **375th** anniversary

Mayflower set stage for lasting pilgrimage

By Maia Davis, Marty McOmber and Randy Weston
The Patriot Ledger

Tom Flaherty first laid eyes on Plymouth as a child.

On summer visits with his family, the lanky Dorchester boy was awed by a rolling, forested countryside completely different from his noisy Boston neighborhood.

"It was like another world, a lot of woods and hardly any people" said Flaherty, who moved to Plymouth in 1988 with his wife. "It was all wide open."

William Brewster and his Pilgrim band had a similar impression when the Mayflower dropped anchor off Plymouth's sandy shores 375 years ago.

The Pilgrims had left England seeking freedom of worship, and found it on the tolerant soil of Holland. But they also wanted land to farm, so they set sail again, this time for the wilderness of the New World.

Plymouth is identified so closely with its founders that the rich history that followed those early years is often overlooked. In the nearly four centuries that separate the Brewsters and the Flahertys came tens of thousands of others who saw in Plymouth a place to thrive.

John Russell arrived in 1749 from Scotland, 14 years old and penniless, and went on to become one of the town's leading shipping merchants.

The end of the 19th century brought Ferdinand Monti from Italy and Joao Costa from the Azores seeking jobs at the Plymouth Cordage Co.

Antonio and Delphina Andrade arrived from Cape Verde in the 1920s, by way of New Bedford, to work in the cranberry bogs.

Joseph Nicholson moved from Saugus to Plymouth in the late 1960s for a job at Boston Edison's nuclear power plant.

The stories of these latter-day Pilgrims may have escaped the attention of most historians, but they survive in their own words and in the recollections of their descendants. If not exactly a microcosm of American history, Plymouth's story nevertheless touches on many of the grand themes.

Benjamin Brewster has spent all of his 70 years within a few miles of the fabled rock where his ancestor William Brewster and the other Mayflower passengers, according to tradition, touched shore.

It wasn't until this spring that the present-day Brewster crossed the ocean to see the countries his Pilgrim forebear had left.

He toured Scrooby, England, the village where William Brewster had served as postmaster and church elder, and he walked the streets of Leyden, Holland, the first haven for his ancestor and fellow religious dissidents.

Benjamin Brewster had always believed the Pilgrims lived in England and Holland in much the same way as here, in grubby, cramped houses such as those re-created at Plimoth Plantation.

"I thought they came from nothing and got to nothing, and the change wasn't that big," he said.

Now he appreciates the sacrifice they made.

They sold homes, furniture, books and clothes, relinquishing orderly urban lives for a precarious existence in the wilderness.

And they arrived under a cloud of debt. Having agreed

Special Series

Another in a
weeklong report
on Plymouth's
375th anniversary
as America's
hometown.



to the harsh terms of the London investors who financed their voyage, they were committed to toil for seven years during which they reaped little for themselves.

Financial hardship and deprivation forged the diverse group into a tightknit colony, where every crop planted and every fur traded was for the communal good.

"Saints," the religious separatists such as Brewster, toiled alongside "Strangers," the Pilgrims remaining faithful to the Church of England, whose numbers included the colony's military leader, Myles Standish.

But by 1627, the plantation began to break up and the settlers spread out. With their debt renegotiated, leaders of the colony parceled out cattle, goats and land among 50 families. Without that democratic division of property, Plymouth would likely have developed along the lines of Virginia and other feudal colonies with a few landowners and many tenants.

But the Pilgrims had made a fateful decision when they chose to settle on a harbor too shallow for large ships.

They had unwittingly denied Plymouth a leading role in the industrial revolution.

"The future of Plymouth was virtually prescribed by 1627," wrote historian Eugene Stratton. "It would be what it would be."

Over the next 100 years, the town continued to thrive and to send settlers south to Cape Cod, north along the coast and west into the rapidly retreating wilderness. Peaceful relations with the Wampanoag Indians, a cornerstone of the settlement's survival, were a distant memory, as Plymouth sent men to fight in the bloody King Philip's War of 1675.

In 1691, Plymouth was absorbed into the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Boston, with five times as many people and a better port, quickly eclipsed its neighbor to the south, but Plymouth still managed to prosper by trading in wood, furs and fish.

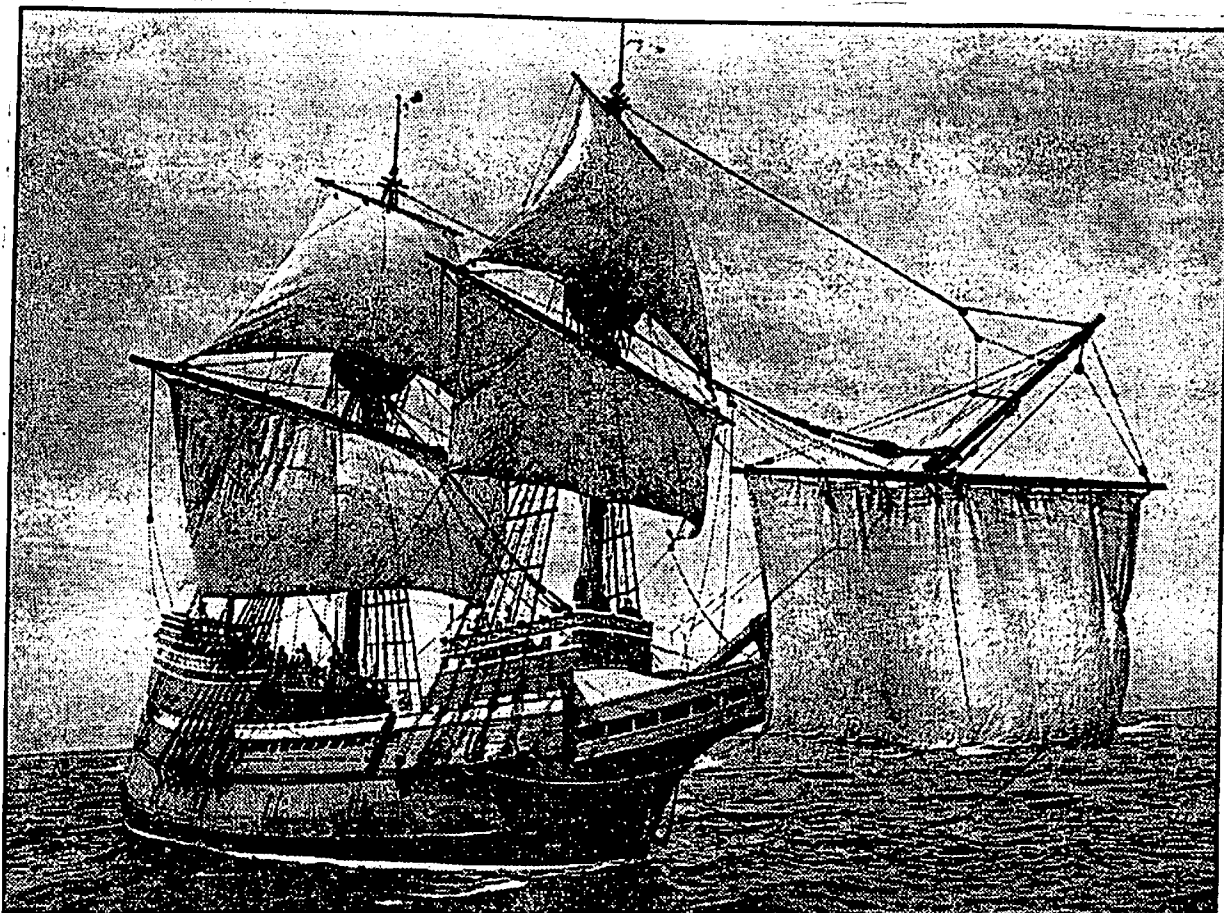
In the town's centennial year, 1720, the original 99 inhabitants had grown to 2,000. Farming and fishing remained mainstays of the economy, but commerce and shipping were becoming more important.

Enter John Russell.

Carrying his only pair of shoes in his hands so he wouldn't wear them out, Russell, 14, arrived in Plymouth in 1749 from Port Glasgow, Scotland.

"We don't know if he was a runaway or what," said John Jackson Russell, a seventh-generation descendant. "All we know is he came with nothing more than the clothes on his back and shoes in his hand and somehow became successful."

As the family story goes, the boy wandered the streets looking for a way to earn money for a night's food and lodging. He was standing outside a tavern when a gentleman rode up and offered him a shilling to watch his horse while he was inside. The boy agreed.



File photo

The Mayflower II under full sail during a recent journey along the Plymouth coast.

Within 10 years, the ragged barefoot stranger was a respected shipping magnate of tea and coffee and a member of Plymouth's social elite.

Although he became the patriarch of a family that helped to define Plymouth's role in the maritime era, Russell was a landlubber prone to seasickness. He preferred to own ships rather than sail them.

Unfortunately, he was in the wrong business at the wrong place at the wrong time. A revolution was coming, and he was forced to choose sides.

When the Sugar Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765 directly taxed goods he traded up and down the Atlantic coast, Russell began turning against Great Britain.

"Every Act of George III seemed to be aimed at John Russell and other shopkeepers," wrote family historian Allen Russell, John Jackson Russell's father.

By 1770, John Russell was an avid supporter of independence, but the rebels' embargo on foreign imports put him out of business. He died penniless in 1776.

The town had 90 boats when the Revolution began and five when it ended.

"Most were captured or sold," Allen Russell wrote. "Others rotted at their wharves."

The industry recovered, but it took the better part of 40 years. The fleet had rebounded to 73 ships by 1808, when Plymouth's maritime fortunes suffered another reversal.

With the approach of a second war with England, President Thomas Jefferson imposed a trade embargo that banned vessels from sailing out of New England ports.

Among those choosing to circumvent the unpopular decree was Capt. John "Deep Water" Russell, grandson

of the first John Russell. Trying to avoid his grandfather's fate, Russell invested in a blockade runner.

Sneaking past government cutters stationed at the tip of Plymouth Beach, he delivered corn, rice, cotton and tobacco around the Eastern Seaboard and later took goods to the Caribbean and England.

For the return journey, Russell loaded up with hemp and canvas in Russia and iron in Sweden for Plymouth's burgeoning rope, sail and metal industries. But there were storm clouds on the horizon.

"There is strong talk of war between England and America," he wrote in his journal. "Hope to get away before that event takes place."

He didn't. Russell spent the War of 1812 detained in Sweden, after losing his crew, cargo and ship. On his return to Plymouth, he continued to sail until 1824, when he stayed home to manage a fleet of ships. But the local shipping industry was doomed. The harbor was too shallow to compete with Boston and New York for clipper ships, the dominant vessels of the era. In 1845, the railroad came to Plymouth, driving the final spike into the town's maritime industry.

Many wealthy families from the maritime era began to pour their resources into manufacturing. Now-forgotten mills along Town Brook and the Eel River used water power to produce iron, textiles, zinc and rope.

Cottage industries flourished as well. Families throughout Plymouth cobbled boots and shoes, 176,000 pairs in 1855 alone.

But the most important product that year was the fashionable neck stock, a cross between a tie and a chin collar. Using imported silk, families would sew the stocks

at home. Sales even outpaced the increasingly important rope market.

Plymouth also led the fashion industry with its woolen mills, which churned out coats and other textiles for the country. The most successful mill, which made high quality worsted suits, was founded by George P. Mabbett in 1900 on Water Street between Chilton and Howland streets. Other mills, such as nearby Puritan Mills, also prospered for a time but unlike Mabbett, they were unable to compete in the civilian market after World War I.

Although Mabbett mills closed in the early 1960s when foreign competition took over, the company was a dominant force in the industry for half a century, even weathering a scandal in the 1950s that rocked the Eisenhower administration.

Bernard Goldfine, who owned Mabbett and New England other wool mills at the time, was cited by Congress for paying hotel bills for Eisenhower Chief of Staff Sherman Adams and giving him a vicuna coat. Adams resigned in the wake of the scandal.

Yet, as the town shifted from shipping to manufacturing, it still looked to the sea for profit. In the vanguard of that sea change was Russell's brother-in-law, Bourne Spooner, founder of the Plymouth Cordage Co.

The typical 19th-century ship used staggering amounts of rope, at least two miles for the rigging alone. Outfitting ships was a huge and competitive market that Spooner dreamed of capturing when he returned to Plymouth in 1822 after working in New Orleans' rope mills.

Spooner, a Mayflower descendant and member of the town's elite, started his venture with \$30,000 in capital from John Russell and other wealthy businessmen.

He founded the Cordage Co. in 1824 on the banks of Nathan's Brook in North Plymouth. Within a year the 1,050-foot-long wooden mill began turning Russian hemp into rope that the company promised would rival any sold in Boston.

For its first three decades, the company employed fewer than 100 people, and they worked from dawn to dark. It barely survived the depression of the early 1840s.

But with the advent of clipper ships and whaling, demand for rope increased. The Civil War also spurred production to new heights, and profits soared.

An abolitionist, Spooner played host to Frederick Douglass and other leaders of the movement. He also contributed substantial sums to their cause. But the war also cost the town dearly, with 80 of its sons killed in the fighting.

By the end of the war, Bourne's enterprise was well on the way to becoming one of the world's premier rope makers. Eventually it would come to dominate Plymouth's economy, transform the town's ethnic makeup, and stamp its mark on generations of workers.

Its golden era, from 1880 to 1920, brought unprecedented expansion and social experimentation that would change Plymouth's character.

Two new and potent markets fueled the company's fortunes: rope for oil wells and binder twine for Midwest wheat fields.

Recovering from a devastating fire in 1885, the Cordage Co. launched an ambitious period of expansion and modernization. It needed workers, and found them far from the mills.

Ferdinand Monti was typical of those who crossed the ocean to make rope in Plymouth. Monti, a tall, thin man with a brown handlebar mustache and round face, worked hard to provide for his wife and four daughters on their tenant farm in northern Italy.

He heard stories about America, a land so rich that it was said people used sausage links to tie up their dogs. So when another Italian family invited the Montis to join them in Plymouth, they jumped at the chance.

"It took a lot of courage to pack up and come here," said their 78-year-old granddaughter, Nellie LeCain, a lifelong resident of North Plymouth. "But there was nothing for them in Italy but poverty."

By the time the Montis arrived in 1895, Italians had been pouring into Plymouth for nearly a decade, nearly all of them to work at Cordage. By 1910, the population of American-born residents fell from 90 to 68 percent, with Italians accounting for 10 percent of the newcomers. German, Canadian and Portuguese immigrants were also arriving in large numbers.

Cordage at that time had 2,000 employees, most of them living in neighborhoods surrounding the factory.

"If you were Italian, you learned to speak Portuguese, and if you were Portuguese you learned Italian," LeCain recalled. "I never learned about racism."

Mostly uneducated and speaking little or no English, the immigrants moved into the company's lower-paying, unskilled positions. For Joao "John" Costa, that meant the sisal room. The job was simple but backbreaking: load sisal plants into machines that culled fibers from the leaves.

The deafening roar made it impossible to communicate except through sign language. That suited Costa, who still struggled with English six years after arriving in America.

Like most Portuguese who settled in Plymouth, Costa had lived in other Massachusetts towns. He landed first in New Bedford, then found work at a stove factory in Taunton.

Early on, he and his wife, Margarida, planned to go back to their hometown of Arrifes in the Azores. But when she returned to visit a sick relative, the stark poverty there jolted her.

"She looked at the pantry and saw one cup and no coffee," recalled her daughter, Mary Costa, who owns the Breezy Hill Motel in North Plymouth. "They may have been poor in America, too, but they always had coffee and baked beans on Saturday."

John Costa worked hard, but Cordage was no sweat shop. The pay was low, about \$9 a week, but the company provided benefits only dreamed of by most American workers.

The most important was housing. Cordage had a long history of building homes for its workers. By 1920, the company owned 351 apartments, rowhouses and single-family homes, most of which outlasted the mills. Rent ranged from \$1.20 to \$4.50 a week.

Most of the houses had a special space in the pantry for the barrels of flour the company sold wholesale and a back yard large enough for a garden, pigs and chickens.

The company also offered classes in carpentry, dressmaking, gardening and cooking. It opened a free kindergarten and health clinic, installed sewers, picked up rubbish and hired a swimming instructor. In winter there was skating under lights at the mill pond, and the company sent horses onto the ice to make sure it was safe.

"Cordage took care of their people," Mary Costa said. "The bosses were good people. They weren't pushers as long as you kept the machines going."

Cordage's beneficence assured the company would have a stable, loyal and productive work force. But historian Samuel Eliot Morison argued that the owners had higher ideals.

"They felt that they were indoctrinating immigrants in the 'American way of life' and enabling them to become self-respecting citizens," he wrote.

Yet Cordage was not immune from labor troubles. During World War I, the mills ran nearly 21 hours a day to keep up with the demand for rope and twine, but wages failed to keep pace.

In 1916 the company had its first strike. Police from as far as Boston were brought in to prevent unrest. After a month on the picket lines, the strikers accepted a 12 percent raise, less than half of what they had demanded. Among the strikers was the anarchist Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who was executed with Nicola Sacco in 1927 for the murder of two payroll couriers in Braintree.

The Cordage Co. reached its peak during the war, with sales of \$29 million a year. Twenty years later, in the depths of the Depression, sales had plunged to \$7 million.

World War II briefly revived the company's fortunes. Once again, the mills ran night and day, churning out the rope that was used to lash planes to aircraft carriers, to tow gliders and to make the embarkation nets for the D-Day invasion of France and other amphibious operations.

Of the 1,800 men and women from Plymouth who went into the armed services, 270 had worked for Cordage. Nellie LeCain, like women across the country, moved into the jobs formerly held by men for the duration.

After the war, shrinking demand and growing foreign competition took their toll. Cordage closed in 1971 after a long decline.

For Mary Costa, the company's passing was like the death of a close relative. To this day she looks with a sense of loss at the brick buildings that now house a struggling shopping mall.

In the shadow of Cordage's rise and fall, another enterprise was quietly taking root: the cranberry industry.

Although native to Massachusetts, cranberries were not planted for profit until after a Cape Cod sea captain accidentally discovered in 1816 that spreading sand across the vines stimulates their growth.

The first manmade bog in Plymouth County was built in 1856 on White Island Pond near the Plymouth, Wareham and Bourne borders. With an ample supply of water and sandy soil that is ideal for the tart fruit, Plymouth quickly became a leading cranberry producer.

At first bog owners relied on relatives and neighbors for their labor supply. But as crops grew larger, immigrants were recruited from nearby cities, and locals began to shy away from the tedious and back-breaking work.

"The cranberry industry, like other industries at the turn of the century, became dependent on the surplus of immigrant labor, which was cheap, docile, hard-working

and, once the picking season ended, expendable," author Joseph Thomas wrote in a history of the business.

The growers found a ready pool of laborers among newcomers from the Cape Verde islands, a Portuguese colony off Africa's west coast until it gained independence in 1975. Most, like Delphina Mendes, left behind grinding poverty.

Mendes was 30 when she boarded a schooner in 1915 to join her future husband, Antonio Andrade, in America.

Andrade worked in Connecticut factories and Pennsylvania steel mills in the early years of their marriage. But they hated city living and constant moving, and in 1922 they settled in Plymouth.

While others from their homeland clustered farther around the Manomet bogs, the Andrades bought a house near the center of town off South Street, where Cape Verdeans lived alongside Italians, Portuguese and Jews.

Their seven children attended public schools, where they quickly picked up the English language and American customs. They also adopted an anglicized name, Andrews, that was given by school officials and reluctantly accepted by their parents.

When he wasn't working in the cranberry bogs, Antonio Andrade continued to follow factory jobs throughout the Northeast. His hard work allowed his wife to stay home, tending a backyard farm of pigs and chickens, fruit trees and a vegetable garden.

"It was a hard life, but it was a better life," recalled their 71-year-old daughter, Angelina Silva of Plymouth. "They came here free. They came here on their own. They chose to come here."

When Silva's father died of a heart attack at 55, in the middle of the Depression, her mother went to work picking blueberries and strawberries during the summer and cranberries in the fall. She also took a job at the Cordage Co. in the 1940s.

Grandson Frank Rose, a vice principal at Plymouth North High School, recalls that as late as the 1950s his family picked cranberries on weekends for extra money.

But it was just about that time growers began substituting mechanical pickers for human laborers. In the wake of a pesticide scare, they also formed a cooperative, Ocean Spray Cranberries, and discovered the value of promotion and marketing. By developing juice products, the growers created a year-round, international demand for a product with a limited seasonal appeal.

Ocean Spray, a Fortune 500 company that processes three-fourths of the world's cranberry products, left Plymouth for Lakeville in 1989. But cranberries remain important to Plymouth, which has 2,000 acres of bogs, 15 percent of the state's total.

But the cranberry industry could never replace the jobs and property taxes lost through the closing of Cordage. So when Boston Edison came knocking on Plymouth's door in the mid-1960s with a plan to build a safe and clean power source for New England, the company was welcomed with open arms.

Long before Three Mile Island and Chernobyl gave the industry a black eye, nuclear power promised a golden future, especially for towns playing host to the plants.

Plymouth stood to almost double its property tax revenue from Pilgrim nuclear power station. And the

Town felt proud of its role in the nuclear era.

"You are building a nuclear reactor within stone's throw, practically, of Plymouth Rock," said Gov. John Volpe at the groundbreaking ceremony Oct. 25, 1967. "You are creating for Massachusetts a living symbol of the fact that not only is our history rich and plentiful, but our future is promising and bright."

For electrical engineer Joseph Nicholson, it was just another day at the office.

A longtime Edison employee, Nicholson moved to Plymouth from Saugus in 1970, the year of the town's 350th anniversary. He and his wife and their three youngest children found a comfortable home in a new subdivision in Chiltonville, a convenient 2½ miles from the plant.

For the next two years, Nicholson spent most of his time at the station helping to ready it for operation.

"I was chief maintenance engineer, and we were all working day and night, 12 hours a day, six days a week," he said.

On Dec. 10, 1972, Pilgrim began pumping out 670,000 kilowatts of power.

"There was a lot of jubilation," he recalled. "It was a good feeling all around."

But the nuclear industry's image began to tarnish soon after Pilgrim's reactor was fired up. The power plant quickly became a lightning rod for the anti-nuclear movement.

Local attorney William Abbott formed a citizens group to fight Edison's plan to build a second reactor in Plymouth. The cause picked up steam on March 28, 1979, when a valve stuck at the Three Mile Island plant outside Harrisburg, Pa., causing the reactor core to overheat. Efforts to shut Pilgrim down went nowhere, but in 1981 Edison scrapped plans to build the \$4 billion second reactor because the cost was so high. That was not the end of Pilgrim's problems.

In 1982, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission fined Boston Edison \$550,000 for safety violations at the plant. Four years later, in an even more serious blow to public confidence in Pilgrim, the same agency named it among the five worst-run nuclear plants in the country. Anti-nuclear activists had been saying for years that it was grossly mismanaged, but the criticism carried more weight coming from a watchdog that had itself been maligned as a booster club for the industry. Suddenly residents who had been content to have Pilgrim as a neighbor were asking pointed questions.

Despite the intensity of the debate, relationships between demonstrators and Boston Edison were strangely congenial. Protesters were even allowed onto the grounds, with escorts, and a field near the entrance was cleared for anti-nuclear rallies.

For Pilgrim employees, the activists were more of an annoyance than a threat.

"We took them seriously, mind you," said Nicholson, who retired in 1992 after 43 years with Edison. "We just didn't understand how people who know so little could do so much. We were living with it day and night, and we knew it was safe. We had our families down the road, too."

In April 1986, the same month the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded in the Ukraine, Pilgrim was taken out of service to repair a leaky valve. It did not start up again for more than 2½ years, its longest shutdown, as Edison overhauled the plant and cleaned house. Major safety improvements were made, and new managers were brought in to oversee the operation.

If the changes did not satisfy die-hard nuclear critics, they clearly succeeded in cooling off the debate. In recent years Pilgrim has generated much more electricity and much less controversy.

Yet with the closing of Yankee Rowe, the only other nuclear plant in Massachusetts, many feel that Pilgrim is in its twilight years. The plant's license expires in 2012, and the town once again is searching for a way to fill a void in its economy. But although Pilgrim represents 800 jobs, the town is no longer as dependent on one mill or one industry as it was in the past.

The completion of Route 3 in 1963 brought Plymouth closer to jobs in Boston, without sending housing prices through the roof. With vast tracts of undeveloped land and a nuclear plant helping to keep the tax rate low, the town was primed for a major building boom.

The first area to grow was the one closest to the highway and Boston, West Plymouth, followed by Manomet and South Plymouth. Just as cranberry growers 90 years before had rushed to plant bogs, developers now hurried to build subdivisions.

Between 1970 and 1980 the population nearly doubled. Most of the newcomers were young couples, like Tom and Terri Flaherty, who were priced out of the housing market in Boston and its wealthy suburbs.

The Flahertys began house-hunting in the suburbs close to their families in Dorchester, but the only houses they could afford were old and cramped. With one baby and another on the way, they needed room to expand. Friends in Plymouth told them about Ponds of Plymouth, a large subdivision under construction off Bourne Road in the south end of town.

Tom Flaherty took one look and was sold. His wife had doubts.

"It was way out in the sticks," she said. "I kept thinking, 'Will anyone visit us?'"

But the price was right, \$142,000, and in March 1988 the Flahertys moved into a three-bedroom home on Kirk Street. The neighborhood went up around them.

"Everything was dirt and construction equipment," said Tom Flaherty, 34, a computer programmer in Canton.

"It was amazing," said Terri Flaherty, 36. "He'd go to work one day, and he'd come home and the framing would be up (for another house)."

Within a few years the real estate market had fallen, causing their home value to drop by about \$20,000. But they say a bigger worry is school crowding.

The family has grown to four children. And the oldest this fall will enter a middle school that has 400 children more than capacity.

Elementary schools are bursting, too. But voters so far have rejected increasing taxes to build new schools.

Plymouth is still trying to catch up with its recent growth, and now it's the Flahertys' turn to be caught up in the transition. Like the Brewsters, the Russells, the Montis, the Costas, the Andrades-Andrews and the Nicholsons, they will help to forge the town's future.

They arrived at different times and made their living in different ways. But they all stayed.

"I laugh when people get up and say 'I've lived in Plymouth all my life,'" Tom Flaherty said. "It doesn't matter if you moved in from out of town or you grew up in the town."

His wife agreed. "It's not like we're planning on going anywhere."

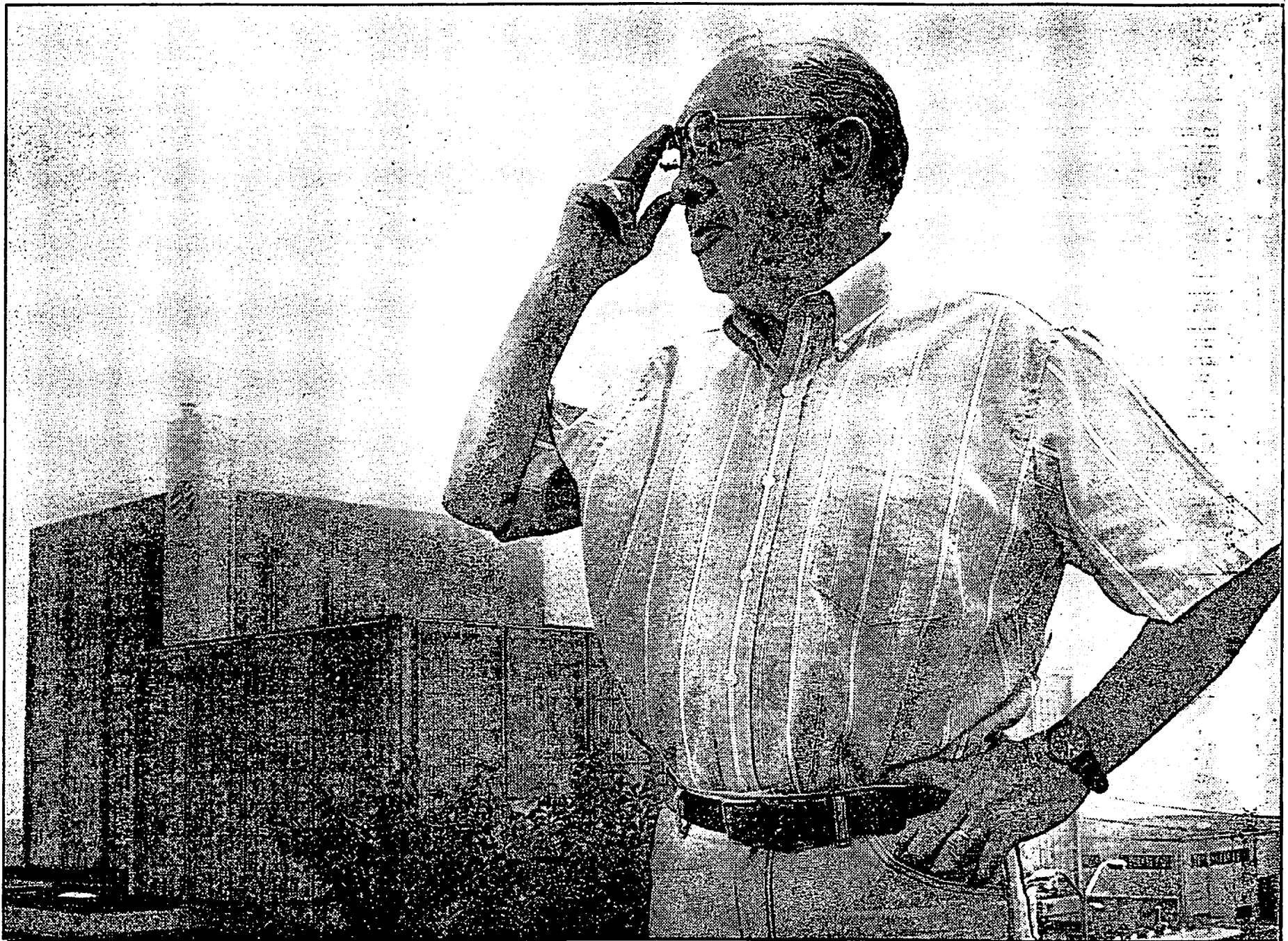
What keeps them here is the same sense of possibility that attracted the Pilgrims.

As Pilgrim Gov. William Bradford said when he saw his new home for the first time, "This bay is a most hopeful place."



Fred Field/The Patriot Ledger

John Jackson Russell stands in front of his ancestral home, the Jackson-Russell-Whitfield house in Plymouth. The home was built in 1782.



Fred Field/The Patriot Ledger

Joe Nicholson of Plymouth is a retired engineer at the Pilgrim nuclear power station, visible in the background.